

THE POWER OF PERSISTENT PRAYER

TEXT: Luke 18:1-8

I recently heard the story about a very bright five-year old who told his daddy that he'd like to have a baby brother. Along with this request, Johnny offered to do whatever he could to help. His dad, a very bright 35 year old, paused for a moment and then replied, "I'll tell you what, Johnny, if you pray every day for two months for a baby brother, I guarantee that God will give you one!"

Johnny responded eagerly to his dad's challenge and went to his bedroom early that night to start praying for a baby brother.

He prayed every night for a whole month, but after that time, he began to get skeptical. He checked around the neighborhood and found out that what he thought was going to happen, had never occurred in the history of the neighborhood. You just don't pray for two months and then whammo – a new baby brother. So Johnny quit praying. After another month, Johnny's mother went to the hospital. When she came back home, Johnny's parents called him into the bedroom. He cautiously walked into the room, not expecting to find anything, and there was a little bundle lying right next to his mother. His dad pulled back the blanket and there was – not one baby brother, but two! His mother had twins!

Johnny's dad looked down at him and said "Now aren't you glad you prayed?"

Johnny hesitated a little and then looked up at his dad and said, "Yes, but aren't you glad I quit when I did?"

Johnny learned that persistent prayer brings results – and perhaps more than you bargained for.

The parable of the widow's persistence is introduced as a parable about prayer and not losing heart, then moves into a story about justice, and ends with a question about faith.

It begins with the introduction of the judge who neither fears God nor respects people. The unrespected people are represented here by a widow whose relentlessness is so bothersome to the judge that she ends up receiving the justice she demands. And the un-feared God will by the end of the parable, eclipse the judge who does not fear him.

Luke often uses widows in his writings. They are usually portrayed as vulnerable, the ones in whom Jesus takes a particular interest. But in addition to being vulnerable, widows also appear as prophetic, active, and faithful. The widow in our story from Luke's gospel is a very persistent person. She is disgruntled. She is not pleased with the way things are going for her. Her persistent petitioning is identified in advance as an image of, and a lesson in, prayer. Luke has already told us a great deal about prayer. The book begins with the whole assembly of the people praying outside the temple. Jesus prays at his baptism and withdraws to pray at key points throughout his ministry and finally at the Mount of Olives. He instructs his followers to pray for those who abuse them.

When the disciples asked him to teach them to pray, he introduced the Lord's Prayer. There, as here, he also encourages them to be persistent and to trust in God's paternal faithfulness, and the teaching ends with Jesus' assurance that their heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask.

So, here is today's parable. We have the persistent widow, a poor, powerless person who is nagging a corrupt judge to do justice for her. The parable *assumes* John the Baptist's teaching that holding a position of power and leadership obligates you to work justly, especially on behalf of the poor and weak. But Jesus focuses the parable on a different point, that we are "to pray always and not lose heart". He identifies the hearers (us) with the woman, and the prayed-to person –(God) with the corrupt judge, a

strange combination. Assuming that Jesus doesn't mean that God is corrupt, the point must be that if persistence pays off with a corrupt human of limited power, how much more will it pay off with a just God of infinite power.

The purpose of the parable is to encourage Christians to persevere in their faith against all odds. But it also has two applications for those who work in positions of leadership. First, the juxtaposition of a corrupt judge with a just God implies that God's will is at work even in a corrupt world. The judge's job is to do justice, and by God, he *will* do justice by the time the widow is finished with him.

Now I know that it is human nature to cheer for the underdog who never quits. But Jesus did not tell us this story so that we might be inspired by the persistent widow. He did it so that we might get a better understanding of our good and gracious Father who, in stark contrast with unjust judges, cares for us and wants to bring about justice for his chosen ones.

Jesus preached the negative to accentuate the positive. The judge in the story was a lazy and wicked man. He kept stalling. He didn't do the right thing. He didn't even do what he was paid to do. But God is nothing like that. God is good. God loves justice. God longs to act quickly! Look at what Jesus said: "And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will God keep putting them off? I tell you, God will see that they get justice, and quickly."

Now comes the part of all this that gives me a problem. The emphasis seems to be on the fact that the widow wears the judge down with her persistence, and the judge votes on her behalf. Isn't it great when we convince someone to vote our way?

Unfortunately, though, this passage is often interpreted to mean that we should petition God for the things we want. And that if we annoy God enough, we'll receive whatever it is. So there's the rich person pestering God for more riches. There's the

young woman worrying God for a lover or spouse. There's the cancer sufferer insisting on God's intervention and healing.

So, if we wear God down, will God fix everything?

I grew up in a culture where it was considered poor form and impolite to be a bother or to pester someone. Children were "seen, not heard". Adults were civil, or worse yet, nice (a word laden with baggage, especially in the South). Folks who either "make a stink" or "raised a ruckus" were highly suspect and sometimes even the objects of outright ridicule. If you follow the rules, keep your composure, and do what's right, the hope is that everything will turn out okay. If it doesn't, well, you still aren't supposed to do too much grouching because, after all, no one ever said life was fair.

Yet in our parable, we find Jesus lifting up another kind of behavior – that of persistent pestering and incessant bothering. Jesus seems to be saying to avoid the route of acting nicely and then waiting to see whether you get results. Advocating for justice is messy work, Jesus seems to say, and a process that can be long, wearisome and frustrating. Yet we are not to lose heart but rather keep on praying, pestering, and persevering.

This parable has been troublesome to me for many years. The main issue has been that I have always put great trust in short two verses from the Gospel of Matthew. In the sixth chapter, verses 7 and 8, read: "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him".

"..For your Father knows what you need before you ask him." How do I reconcile this statement when Jesus tells us that the power comes from persistent prayer?

So, if God knows what I need before I even ask, and if Jesus tells us not to heap up empty phrases, in other words "persistent pestering", what am I to do? I have finally

decided that what I need is to find a middle ground. Yes, God does know my needs even before I am aware of them. Yes, God hears what my heart is relaying even before its beating becomes audible to me. And, yes, there must be a purpose for persistent prayer. And that purpose is to continually build and transform my relationship with God. The more time I take in communion with God, the closer our relationship becomes. The more consistent my prayer time becomes, the better I listen to what God has to tell me. The more I open myself to the two-way communication that is essential to prayer, the more I hear God and know that God hears me.

When our time in prayer and meditation becomes a two-way avenue of communication, the less we find ourselves “persistently pestering”, and the more we find ourselves listening and learning. I believe the parable of the persistent widow teaches us the power of prayer. Prayer is the link that connects us with God. Prayer includes silence, listening, writing, movement, and other practices beyond the spoken word. May we all learn the power of persistent prayer in our lives. Amen.